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SUBJECT: NEPAL'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM DEVASTATED BY MAOISTS

REF: (A) KATHMANDU 2307

(B) KATHMANDU 2151
(C) KATHMANDU 2228
(D) KATHMANDU 2280
(E) KATHMANDU 2346
(F) KATHMANDU 657

1. Summary: The Nepali education system has suffered tremendously in the country's nearly seven years of ongoing Maoist insurgency. Private schools have been shut down by the insurgents and teachers afraid of Maoist violence have abandoned their posts. Public schools that are open often are crowded far beyond their capacity. Students have reported that they are afraid to stay in school for fear of being forcibly recruited into the Maoist ranks. Educational strikes, violence against teachers, attacks on school property and fear of getting caught in the middle of clashes between government and Maoist forces have terrified children trying to concentrate on their studies. Overcrowded classrooms have seriously compromised the quality of education. End summary.

SCHOOLS CLOSED AND TEACHERS DISPLACED -----

2. Since the beginning of Nepal's Maoist insurgency in 1996, at least 700 private schools have been forcibly closed, according to estimates by the Private and Boarding School Organization of Nepal (PABSON). President of the association Rajesh Khadka has stated that in 25 districts, the insurgency has forced all private schools to close their doors.

3. Sources at the Department of Education (DOE) say that they have yet to complete a comprehensive assessment of the effect of the insurgency on public schools, but estimate that 3,000 teachers have been displaced by the Maoists, beaten or killed. The DOE estimates that 100,000 students are unable to attend school as a result.

4. Human rights organizations and interest groups cite figures that are considerably higher. According to the Informal Sector Service Center (INSEC), a human rights NGO, 2,000 schools have been closed down nationwide, and 60,000 children are unable to attend school in Surkhet district alone. The Nepal Teachers' Organization asserts that many teachers in outlying areas have moved to district headquarters, while a number of others have been detained by security forces or the Maoists.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS: OVERCROWDED, POORLY FUNDED -----

5. As private schools are shut down by the insurgency, students are forced to move to already overburdened public schools. Overcrowding in rural areas has reached crisis levels, with teacher to student ratios reaching 1:100 in some districts. "And that's if all of the teachers show up," say analysts at World Education, an NGO monitoring the insurgency's impact on education. "If teachers have been displaced or simply don't come to school, there are even more students in a single classroom. There is nowhere for them to sit, no supplies for them to use, or sometimes no teachers at all."

6. Overcrowding has denied access to public schools for the poorest and most disadvantaged children in some areas. According to World Education, the press of students has led some government schools to enforce more strictly their documentary requirements for entry, in order to reduce enrollment. Students who cannot provide birth certificates, proof of citizenship or other evidence that they are entitled to public school education are simply turned back at the door. Typically, students who are from poor families or who have been displaced from their homes are less likely to possess the required documents than the students who have

moved from private schools.

17. Public schools in Maoist-affected areas also are suffering from a lack of funds for school management and maintenance, as neither the government nor the Maoists provide for schools' financial needs. The schools visited by an NGO assessment team in August lacked sanitation facilities, water, furniture, books and supplies. The same NGO found that in western Kailali district, if teachers try to raise funds through donations from parents, they are harassed by Maoists who see the donations as a fee. Yet if the teachers ask the Maoists themselves for funds, the insurgents reply that their aim is not to solve problems but to create them to aid the insurgency.

VIOLENCE AGAINST STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

18. If social unrest and conflict are beneficial to the Maoist cause, the insurgents have spared no effort in pursuing their aims in the schools of Nepal. Bomb attacks on school premises, violence against teachers and forced recruitment of students have made benefits of education less important to many children and parents than day-to-day security. Both sides of the conflict use school buildings as shelters, and both sides have interrogated students on school grounds.

19. Students in southern Siraha district, for example, were terrorized by skirmishes between Maoists and government forces that took place inside their high school, during school hours. The school was closed for ten days, and students are still frightened to attend classes.

110. Children from rural areas have told NGO workers that they are afraid to walk to school for fear of being caught in the crossfire between government forces and Maoists. Post has reported several incidents in which children walking to school were killed or injured by Maoist bombs (refs B-D). Even simple facts of life have become serious threats for rural children--particularly girls--thanks to the Maoist practice of placing landmines and bombs in the brush near school buildings. Most of the schools in the hills have no toilets, and those that do usually have facilities only for the boys. When children walk away from the building and into the bushes, they encounter Maoist bombs.

111. As children cope with an environment of fear and uncertainty, child welfare officers report that students' attention spans have shortened, they have become more easily distracted, and they pay less attention to their studies. Available statistics demonstrate that last year's school results in the rural districts were poor. In Dipayal, capital of Doti district, 17 of the 25 primary schools failed to have a single student pass the final exam. Only 14 students in the district scored higher than the passing grade of 32 percent. In northern Humla, the situation was even worse: only four students in the entire district passed their exams last year.

112. Violence and threats against teachers have been widespread, and many have fled their posts. In eastern Bhojpur, for example, approximately 500 students were affected when four teachers failed to return to one secondary school after the Dasain holidays. The students were unable to complete their math, English, economics or science courses in time for annual examinations. In Melamchi, central Sindhupalchowk district, students boarded over the doors to their own secondary school building after all of the teachers, fearing Maoist attacks, abandoned their positions.

EDUCATION STRIKES

113. Not only rural students are affected. Maoist insurgents this month declared an "indefinite educational strike" throughout the Kathmandu Valley (ref E), closing an estimated 5,000 schools and affecting over 500,000 students. A nationwide two-day educational strike took place concurrently, on December 11 and 12. Though educational organizations in the Valley had initially stated their intention to observe the strike, or "bandh," for only five days, Maoist violence against schools defying the bandh in other areas of the country led the groups to recant. General observance of the strike has been extended until December 22.

114. The Maoists have declared nationwide strikes throughout the past year, almost always to the detriment of education, and at least one seems to have been deliberately timed to disrupt student schedules. In April, widespread public discontent with a strike slated for the same dates as national secondary school exams led Maoists to postpone the bandh until later in the month (ref F). Despite vocal

public protest of this month's indefinite strike, however, the Maoists have refused to compromise.

CHILD LABOR, HEALTH, NUTRITION AFFECTED

15. The effects of the ongoing insurgency on education are insidious. Children who have lost parents in the insurgency are more likely to have to work to support their families, and therefore forgo their education. Students with no access to health care are more likely to miss school as a result of illness. In Rukum, security concerns have put an end to a seven-year-old UNFP program that delivered nutrient-enriched meals to 13,000 primary school students free of cost. Food stopped reaching schools in September, when security forces, suspecting that the supplies were being used by Maoists, put an embargo on distribution. Attendance has steadily tapered off since the schools have stopped distributing free meals. One primary school reported a drop from 220 students to 120 in the last three months.

COMMENT

16. Maoist claims of being pro-education are becoming more ridiculous by the day as regional strikes and nationwide warfare continue to deprive students of the chance to go to school and the right to security. Progress in combating child labor, increases in literacy and school attendance and other gains in the fight for education of Nepali children are sliding backwards in the face of the Maoist onslaught. Though political parties, NGOs and many donor countries have remained relatively silent on the issue until now, the recently declared educational strike in Kathmandu has sparked some public outcry and a call by human rights groups for the government and the insurgents to declare schools as "safe havens" or "peace zones." But though the GON may be spurred out of its inertia by public protests, it remains to be seen whether the Maoists will back down from their intransigent demands and to let Nepal's children get back to the business of education.

MALINOWSKI